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ABSTRACT

A survey was conducted at Harcum Junior College, a private, independent college for women, to ascertain student perceptions of the pedagogical characteristics of teachers who they believed had been most successful in developing their thinking processes. The responses of 390 students, 78% of the total student body, were compared with the responses of 117 male and female students attending a 4-year state college in New York and of 184 male and female students attending a University Center in New York to a similar, previously conducted survey. In both studies, students were asked to select from among 13 instructor characteristics the three that had the greatest impact on their thinking. A high level of agreement was found among all three groups with respect to the five most influential qualities; i.e., expert knowledge of subject; ability to stimulate student interest; enthusiastic attitude toward subject; ability to explain clearly; and systematic organization of subject matter. Among the qualities viewed by students as having the least impact on their thinking processes were attempts to use individualized instruction, tolerance toward student disagreement, and fairness in marking and grading tests. (Author/HB)

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EFFECTIVE COLLEGE TEACHING FACILITATES STUDENT THINKING AT A JUNIOR COLLEGE

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JC 820 129

EFFECTIVE COLLEGE TEACHING FACILITATES STUDENT THINKING AT A JUNIOR COLLEGE

The objective of this inquiry was to ascertain student perceptions as to what they believe to be the teachers' pedagogical characteristics of 'greatest impact' upon their thinking processes. A high degree of unanimity characterizes the responses of 690 students enrolled in three demographically-different populations: Harcum Junior College; State College, N.Y.; University Center, N.Y.

This inquiry revealed that a very diverse population of students - male and female, freshmen and seniors - chose the following teacher characteristics as being of 'greatest impact' in 'making them think':

1- Expert knowledge of subject.
2- Ability to stimulate student interest.
3- Enthusiastic attitude toward subject.
4- Ability to explain clearly.
5- Systematic organization of subject.

"Teaching, at best, is a difficult task, rewarding but far from easy. Experts have not yet reached concensus as to what constitutes good teaching. What one group of theorists says is good, another group disputes." (1)

The 'mechanical' aspects of good teaching have been the subject of innumerable studies. This inquiry, however, focuses upon another dimension - the thinking processes of students in two-year colleges and their perceptions as to what occurs in classes/laboratories.

Students at Harcum Junior College, a private, independent college for women, located in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, were invited - in the laste 1970s - to respond to a brief questionnaire; anonymously. They were asked to select, (in their minds only; not otherwise identify), the instructor ..."who has been most successful in developing your thinking processes." Some 389, or 78% of the total student-body responded by checking from among 13 instructor characteristics the 3 which had the "greatest impact" on their thinking.

It is to be emphasized that the purpose of this inquiry was not to draw broad generalizations; make recommendations; criticize; or voice 'complaints'.

Its sole purposes were to:

(1) Walsh, Garner V. in College & University Teaching: Summer 1972; Vol.XX. No.5.

"1- report on the opinions of several samples of students regarding instructors who have made them "think".

2- raise questions which should cause instructors to look more closely and carefully at the classroom-laboratory practices which intimately involve and concern them.

3- seek a closer identification between instructors and students as to what constitutes good teaching. The only possible result is a better teaching-learning situation, and who can argue against that?" (2)

Table 1, which follows, contains three rank-order listings. Column 'A', for the Harcum sample of 389 female students is compared and contrasted with Column 'B', a sample of 117 students, male and female, attending a four-year state college in New York state; and Column 'C', a sample of 184 students, male and female, attending a University Center in New York State.

Among those reading this report, perhaps teachers may identify each of the 13 qualities enumerated in Table 1 as being part of 'good' teaching. These characteristics undoubtedly represent, for many people, necessary teaching dimensions, for it is scarcely disputable that all are admirable and desirable. However, the objective of this inquiry was to ascertain student perceptions as to what they believe to be the pedagogical characteristics of "greatest impact" upon their thinking processes.

As Table 1 reveals, there is an exceptionally high degree of congruence among these three student groups in their choices of instructor characteristics which stimulate them to think. As Walsh observed for the two non-Harcum samples:...."The data almost appear rigged".

In no case is there more than a 3.5 ranking-spread among these three groups in rankings they assigned any single intructor quality - the average being 1.5, with a range of 0 to 3.5 . Two rankings assigned by them are identical, and four reveal only a single-order spread.

(2) Ibid. p.155.

TABLE I

Qualities of "Greatest Importance: Ranked

QUALITIES		A	B	C
1. Systematic organization of subject matter	(10)	4	6	5
2. Good speaking ability (mechanical)	(2)	9	10	9
3. Ability to explain clearly	(12)	3	4.5	4
4. Ability to stimulate student interest	(8)	2	2	3
5. Sympathetic attitude toward students	(4)	10	9	10
6. Expert knowledge of subject	(13)	1	1	1
7. Enthusiastic attitude toward subject	(11)	5	3	2
8. Fairness in marking and grading tests	(7)	8	11	11.5
9. Tolerance toward student disagreement	(6)	12	13	11.5
10. Warm, outgoing personality	(9)	7	7	7
11. Encourages active student participation in the classroom	(3)	6	4.5	6
12. Maintains balance between theoretical and practical aspects of course	(5)	11	8	8
13. Attempts to use individualized instruction	(1)	13	12	13

( ) = Rank-ordering of qualities having <u>least</u> impact on thinking.

The unanimity of student responses, evident in Table 1, among this substantial-sized sample of 690 individuals certainly suggests that these learning 'customers' quite consistently perceived the same teach characteristics as being those qualities of "greatest impact". This fact might well be pondered by <u>all</u> professional educators who are both open-minded and willing to consider 'customer-relations' !

Turning to the obverse side of the coin, in response to the request to rank those qualities which had the <u>least</u> impact upon their thinking; for the Walsh-reported samples he concluded ..."The results are not reported since the correlation was so high with the previous ranking that they do not add to the knowledge to be gained from this research." For the Harcum sample, as the rankings in parentheses reveal - there is also a high level of consistency in their responses. A 'perfect' inverse-ranking relationship for each

individual characteristic would yield a total 'score' of 14; i.e., ranked highest, or 1st, for "greatest impact" and ranked lowest, or 13th for "least" impact.

On the average, there is only a 1.8 variation from this 'perfect' inverse-ranking relationship among the Harcum sample. Four characteristics are 'on target'; two reveal a one-rank variation; and three evidence a two-rank variation. Clearly then - in most instances the students perceived different characteristics in a wholly consistent pattern when they selected those having "greatest" and "least" impact upon their thinking.

In scanning Table 1, some interesting questions come to mind. Why, for example, do all three samples consistently minimize the importance of individualized instruction? (Might this, perhaps, reflect the fact that most students are unfamiliar with this teaching approach and as a consequence few would select it ?) Then - as Walsh asks; ..."Is not a good speaking ability really one of the most important qualities of good teaching?" Evidently, for this sizeable group of almost 700 students, it is perceived as being of lesser import than "Warm, outgoing personality" or "Enthusiastic attitude toward subject" ". (Does this, possibly, reflect the hierarchal 'strength' of personality characteristics, as student-perceived, with 'mechanical' capabilities?)

One might also wonder about the 'reasoning' behind the fact that all three groups feel that a theoretical-practical balance; (item 12 in Table 1) is not nearly as important to them as an enthusiastic instructor-attitude toward subject - (item 7; Table 1). Conjecture: - could this be because students, in general, are 'impressed' when a competent instructor evidences enthusiasm for his/her subject? Such an attitude on the part of the teacher is 'catching' - 'infecting' students as it were. On the other hand, the impersonal facts about theoretical-practical course balance does not enthuse them: it simply leaves them 'cold'.

Would it also not be interesting to know (with assurance!) why there are far greater similarities than differences among the perceptions of these demographically-different groups of students?

Readers studying the ranking relationships revealed by Table 1 can surely pose additional questions germane to their personal, and individual, techniques for teaching. In any event, this diverse group of students, (both male and female; freshmen through seniors at 2-and-4 year colleges/universities), numbering 690 - opt for the following teacher-characteristics as being - in their collective perception-judgements, of "greatest impact" in stimulating them to think:

1st. - Expert knowledge of subject.
2nd. - Ability to stimulate student interest.
3rd. - Enthusiastic attitude toward subject.
4th. - Ability to explain clearly.
5th. - Systematic organization of subject-matter.

This then, is what 'good' teaching means to students. Certainly from their standpoint it makes good sense, too. Why should students waste their time when the instructor has only in-expert knowledge of his/her subject? Top-ranking this characteristic is eminently practical when considered from the 'customer's' viewpoint!

Not too surprisingly - if the instructor does not 'turn on' the student to his/her subject, why would the student want to continue the course if he/she is simply not interested? Again - the second-ranking of this skill appears quite understandable.

Enthusiasm breeds enthusiasm: third-ranking this important behavioral characteristic seems entirely reasonable as an important teacher-quality for stimulating student thinking.

Certainly effective communication on the part of the instructor is essential if the student is not to be 'short-changed' in achieving an under-

standing of the subject. Again - from the 'customer's' perspective, the importance of this capability is a most practical one: it is therefore quite understandable as a "greatest impact" element.

And finally - to help put the various parts of the course into meaningful perspective seems to be an eminently logical item to select. If the student cannot effectively integrate the total course content because the instructor has been un-systematic in his/her presentations, this seriously penalizes the student!

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The learned Fool writes his Nonsense in better
Language than the unlearned; but still 'tis Nonesense.

--- Benjamin Franklin

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